

### **Commissioner Vilaseca Opinion Piece on ESEA Waiver (October 25, 2011)**

Vermont and the rest of the country have been given a wonderful opportunity to shed the flawed aspects of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and refocus our efforts on true success for all students.

When it was enacted in 2001, NCLB brought sweeping change to the way schools, states and the country measured student progress. One of its strengths was requiring us all to examine how students from low-income households, with disabilities, and other demographic subgroups were doing. No longer could students in those groups disappear in the data. This is a significant accomplishment that is now cemented in our nation's educational consciousness.

However, the great flaw of NCLB was the punitive Adequate Yearly Progress determinations based on a single assessment, which last year required my department to publicize that 72% of Vermont schools were not making progress, a figure which is only expected to increase here and across the country as the deadline for 100% proficiency by 2014 approaches. This was an unfair expectation since it did not take into account student progress, but rather on each student hitting an arbitrary target based only on the results of one assessment.

Secretary of Education Arne Duncan recently invited all State Education Agencies to request flexibility from NCLB on behalf of themselves, their schools and districts, in order to better focus on improving student learning. This waiver is not a way of lowering expectations for student learning, or for lowering the bar from what we expect of all schools. Rather, it will help us accurately assess how students are doing, and focus state and national supports on the schools of highest need.

Requesting this waiver is truly an opportunity for Vermont to propose our desired system of accountability. We are designing a system that measures student growth towards high standards. We will be looking at their entire educational career to ensure that they are prepared to continue their education after high school in some form. Students who are bright but do not test well will have other measures that can be used to determine their success or challenges. We will be setting up a system that is not guided by seat time or credit attainment, but rather on student demonstration of learning, on national, statewide, grade level and classroom assessments.

In addition, we are designing a system that will create public "report cards" on every school in the state, on a variety of measures. We will recognize schools for doing outstanding work, and will highlight outstanding models so other schools can replicate best practices. We also will target state and national resources on schools that truly need help in ensuring all students reach their full potential.

The deadline for this waiver request is fast approaching. My staff is working with educational leaders from across the state, representing teachers, principals, superintendents, school board members and special educators to develop the best system for Vermont's students. We will be posting draft versions of the waiver request on our Web site, hosting stakeholder meetings across the state, and otherwise doing what we can to ensure that Vermont parents, students and taxpayers can weigh in on this important request. If granted, this waiver would go into effect immediately. If we do nothing, we will continue to be held to the current requirements of NCLB, which distract our teachers, administrators, and department from the important work of supporting students in reaching their full potential.

Armando Vilaseca is Vermont's Commissioner of Education.